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**“Engaging Baby Boomers in Meeting the Challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”**

**Remarks by David Eisner, CEO  
Corporation for National and Community Service  
to the Policy Committee for the 2005 White House Conference on Aging  
ORAL May 18, 2005**

Thank you and good morning, Madam Chair and members of this Committee. I want to thank you for allowing me this opportunity to speak to you this morning. I greatly appreciate the importance of this Committee’s work and know that what I have to say today is both relevant and timely. I also want to let you know that I am especially pleased to be testifying as our Nation celebrates Older Americans Month in recognition of an extraordinary but underused national resource.

In my capacity as CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service, I have seen the great difference that volunteering and community service by people of all ages and backgrounds can make, both for those in need and also for the volunteers themselves. As a result, I strongly believe that fostering volunteering and other forms of civic engagement, especially among baby boomers and the entire 55+ population, is a key to addressing a wide range of pressing social issues on the horizon.

This morning I would like to do three things: 1) to explain why it is so important to view seniors and the aging baby boomer population as assets rather than as costs; 2) to describe in general terms what we need to do to engage more and more older Americans in their communities; and 3) to give specific recommendations on how the various sectors of our society can work together to ensure that the baby boom generation finds meaningful and fulfilling ways to engage in their communities.

Let me give you a quick example of what I mean. Today in America’s cities we see how upset people are by the high percentage of experienced teachers who are retiring each year. Instead of focusing on the negative aspects of this trend, we have an extraordinary opportunity to turn this situation into a social benefit. Indeed, the retirement of baby boomer teachers presents our Nation with the opportunity to engage a large cadre of trained and experienced adults as mentors and tutors. Even if we can only induce a small percentage of these new retirees to become active in this area, we could make tremendous progress in addressing the critical needs of supporting disadvantaged youth.

The same applies to pre-school literacy programs. Today, we are able to reach only about 20 percent of children eligible for pre-school literacy training. If we were able to attract just a small percentage of baby boomers willing to serve in this area, we could meet this challenge. In the same way, imagine how valuable it would be if baby boomers and other older adults – professionals and non-professionals alike – could be deployed to solve a wide array of social problems facing our communities, especially in areas like education, public safety, transportation, mental health, and independent living support for seniors. For example:

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- Older persons from all backgrounds and walks of life could serve as mentors
- Retired or older business people could provide business advice and career counseling
- Retired or older doctors, nurses, and trained medical personnel could provide health care services to low-income and elderly neighbors
- Retired law enforcement, military and security personnel could engage in public safety activities and trainings
- Concerned older citizens could participate in Neighborhood Watch and park patrol and cleanup operations.

The possibilities are endless.

Over the past decade, we at the Corporation have seen all these benefits provided by participants in our programs. President Bush speaks of the armies of compassion. We like to think of our programs as the supply lines to the armies of compassion – supplying community groups with people, training, management assistance, technical help, and so much more.

Our three Senior Corps programs – RSVP, the Foster Grandparent Program, and the Senior Companion Program – make up the largest network of senior volunteer opportunities in the Nation. Through these programs, more than 500,000 volunteers age 55 and older are engaged in a virtual universe of community-improving volunteer activities, including many that are critically important to meeting the needs of children and older Americans. More than 277,000 of our half million Senior Corps volunteers, for example, serve through approximately 21,000 organizations in the Aging network whose mission is to address the needs of seniors. These include adult day care centers, senior centers, Meals on Wheels programs, home health agencies, nursing homes, and other agencies. And, approximately 8,000 Foster Grandparent and RSVP volunteers serve almost 90,000 children in Head Start centers alone. Add to that the thousands of others who serve in schools, juvenile detention centers, and other educational settings, and you get a sense of the impact that they have on their communities.

We at the Corporation have long viewed seniors not as social cost, but as an underused asset; not just as consumers of social resources, but as untapped human capital. Using this resource to fullest advantage will become critically important to our Nation as the 77 million members of the baby boom generation reach retirement age and begin to look to spend the “final third” of their lives in ways that are fulfilling, productive, and meaningful – not only for ourselves and our families, but also for our communities and our country.

Senior Corps programs SVP, the Foster Grandparent Program, and the Senior Companion Program – make up the largest network of senior volunteer opportunities in the Nation. Through programs, more than 500,000 volunteers age 55 and older are engaged in a virtual universe of community-improving volunteer activities, including many that are critically important to meeting the needs of older Americans. More than 277,000 of our half million Senior Corps volunteers serve through approximately 21,000 adult day care centers, senior centers, Meals on Wheels programs, home health agencies, nursing homes, and others. Using this resource to fullest advantage will become critically important as the 77 million members of the baby boom generation reach retirement age and begin to look to spend the “final third” of their lives.

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Baby boomers, however, are different in many ways from our parents' generation, and from other generations before us.. First, we are more youth-focused and self-focused – in fact, we tend to have a near-obsession on looking good and staying healthy. Moreover, we are interested in achieving balance and flexibility in our work, leisure, and volunteer time, even in our later years. Not content to use our retirement as a time to relax, we baby boomers are interested in doing something real and substantial with our time – and in achieving meaningful and tangible results. We want to be able to choose the time, duration, and method of our service, within broad guidelines. We want to be as free as possible of red tape, regulations, and bureaucratic barriers. And, importantly, we are interested in being recognized – either financially or otherwise – for our contributions.

There are a few other stumbling blocks to our active participation in civic activities. For one, the word “volunteering” itself doesn't hold much attraction to the baby boomers; nor do most of us respond well to appeals to civic duty and responsibility. In fact, throughout our lifetimes, we boomers generally have been less involved in volunteering and other forms of civic engagement than our parents' generations. So we have big shoes to fill, and we have much work to do, especially since civic engagement in one's early years is a good predictor of civic engagement as one gets older.

On the positive side, we baby boomers, who came of age in a period of great social idealism, indicate a need to continue to effect social change. Many boomers were in their formative years when President Kennedy issued his famous call to “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” That message still resonates very strongly among a wide cross-section of baby boomers.

There also are some encouraging statistical signs that interest in baby boomer service and volunteering is increasing. For the 12 months ending September 2004, for example, data from the Current Population Survey on Volunteering, an annual survey conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, indicate that the volunteer rate for persons ages 35 to 44 – the highest among all age categories, with 34.2 percent of the cohort volunteering – was not very much higher than the volunteer rate for those ages 45 to 54 or for those ages 55 to 64, the two cohorts containing the great majority of baby boomers. Moreover, the volunteer rate among older Americans has risen sharply in recent years. For example, the rate of the 45-to-54-year-old cohort rose from 31.3 percent in 2002 to 32.8 percent in 2004, and the rate of the 55-to-64-year-old cohort rose from 27.5 percent in 2002 to 30.1 percent in 2004. What's more, from 2002 through 2004, the percentage of retired baby boomers who volunteered increased steadily, from about 25 percent in 2002 to about 30 percent in 2004. These figures, I believe, give early evidence of boomers' desire to turn their longer, healthier lives into increased community involvement.

As a Nation, then, how should we prepare to take fullest advantage of these trends? We know that traditional but inactive roles in volunteering, such as administrative and other clerical tasks, generally hold little to no appeal for the baby boomer generation — although, of course, we also know that those tasks are often necessary. We know that we boomers are more likely than our parents' generation to be attracted by volunteer programs and activities that focus on one-time, limited, episodic and project-based volunteer service that we can seamlessly weave into the rest of our their busy lives. Our challenge, then, is to build an appropriate infrastructure of service

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opportunities that harness boomers' skills and accommodates their preferences. We then need to promote older adult volunteering in a way that overcomes ageism and stereotypical views of older Americans and that stimulates a national discussion of the vital, positive roles they can play in their later years.

As you might suspect, these are issues that we have been studying and discussing for some time at the Corporation. Currently, we have found that there are too few boomer-friendly volunteer service activities for the 55+ population across the entire volunteer world at large. Mobilizing baby boomers in great numbers will take tremendous efforts on the part of government, business, and nonprofit groups, including human service and aging organizations, to create the kind of infrastructure that will support and sustain a new vision of volunteering for these adults. To begin this process, we must educate and encourage nonprofit organizations, businesses, and even government to think differently about volunteers and how they utilize them – and then help them refocus their resources to develop new model programs, policies, and incentives that support high-impact volunteer opportunities and engagement by older adults.

Let me offer you just one quick example. Most nonprofit groups would hire a professional consultant or executive to do strategic planning, and then use volunteers to do office and clerical tasks. Few, however, would reverse that scenario – recruit a retired business executive as a volunteer to do strategic planning, and hire relatively low-cost administrative help to support them. We believe that in the future, more non-profits will need to reverse their thinking. And one way that government can help is to provide incentives that encourage nonprofit groups to begin to think and act differently.

Moreover, we know that we have to find ways to encourage charities and nonprofit groups that use baby boomers in volunteer service to acquire a higher degree of sophistication in their volunteer management skills and capacities. In 2003, the Corporation conducted a study in partnership with USA Freedom Corps, the Urban Institute, and the UPS Foundation. This study revealed that most charities currently do not have adequate staff or financial resources to invest in this area, and therefore are not able to focus on effective volunteer management practices. Few, for example, have a full-time person on staff to oversee volunteers. Even fewer offer a range of activities and incentives, or have written policies or job descriptions for volunteer involvement, or screen volunteers to suitably match them to the most appropriate activities. Regular volunteer recognition or incentives are almost nonexistent – something that boomers, as I mentioned earlier, seem to require – and nonprofits invest very little in training and professional development opportunities, either for their volunteers or for members of their staffs assigned to manage volunteers.

With smart investment in these kinds of undertakings, we can make tremendous strides toward creating a new vision for 55 and older volunteering. This is important because the very size of the baby boomer generation means that tapping even a relatively small percentage to volunteer otherwise become involved in their communities will reap extraordinary benefits for our communities and our Nation.

Let's consider an issue of interest to this Committee -- independent living support for seniors. We know that by the year 2015, when the next White House Conference on Aging will take place, our country will be suffering a crisis in long-term health care, including independent living support services for older Americans. At that time, most

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experts agree, the projected number of people needing assistance will be significantly higher than the number of people – including family members and paid caregivers – available to provide that care. As a Nation, we need to take giant steps now to improve the support structure for independent living services. The engagement of volunteers for such support services is not only doable, but also extremely cost effective.

Last October, I discussed this very issue at a Forum on Independent Living for Seniors sponsored by the nonprofit group Innovations in Civic Participation. The forum brought together thought leaders from several organizations in the aging, non-profit, and government worlds. Among their recommendations, the participants called for greater use of volunteers for a variety of key activities related to independent living for seniors. For example, volunteers can be used to free up the time of trained and licensed professionals and agency staff so they can focus more of their attention on matters that require professional expertise; they can serve as “information resources” for homebound seniors and help to fill the need for transportation services among the elderly. More importantly, volunteers can be used to provide respite for family and other caregivers, who, as you know, are under extraordinary pressure to provide constant quality care for their loved ones. Participants at the forum specifically cited the Corporation’s Senior Companion Program as an effective model of support for homebound adults – a model that helps to improve the quality of life not only of the homebound individuals, but also of their regular caregivers and of the volunteers themselves.

I’ve spent time meeting with Senior Companions throughout the country. And I have been very inspired by their commitment to their frail homebound “clients.” These volunteers dedicate 20 hours or more a week to assisting needy seniors. Getting more baby boomers involved in this area will be critically important to solving this impending crisis.

While volunteering among older adults is an important element of ensuring the well-being of our communities, it has also been shown to contribute to the physical and emotional health and well-being of the volunteers themselves. Several research studies, for example, indicate that older people who volunteer have fewer medical problems than the senior population at large. Specifically, volunteer activity has been shown to decrease incidences of heart disease, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. It also has been shown to increase the cognitive skills of older adults because it protects their memory as they age.

The mental benefits for older Americans of becoming involved cannot be overstated. In my travels I have met countless individuals who, because of the loss of a spouse, the onset of a disease, or the sudden realization that filling time can be a daunting task, find a new sense purpose by becoming involved in community activities. The feeling of being part of a team or of a worthwhile enterprise can do wonders for older people’s mental health – a finding that has proven to be especially true for retirees struggling to adjust to life without the structure of the workplace. Even older adults who volunteer just two to three hours a week have been shown to have higher rates of satisfaction with their lives than those who do not get involved – and they have even been shown to live longer.

Take the case of Harry McDermott, an 83-year-old Foster Grandparent who volunteers at Taft Elementary School in Boise, Idaho. Harry says working with the kids has added 25 years to his life. As he put it, if he didn’t volunteer with the kids, “I’d

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probably be dead. I wouldn't have nothing to live for." Here in D.C., we have a Foster Grandparent volunteer who, when she first started volunteering at her school, needed to walk with a cane. In trying to keep up with the kids, however, she realized she no longer needed the cane, and put it aside.. And in Riverside, California, "Grandma Ellie," a Foster Grandparent, was on blood pressure and a host of other medications for nearly 20 years before become involved through the Central County United Way. Nowadays, she says, "I take absolutely no medicine whatsoever except Vitamin C. I'm off everything, and I was really dependent on a lot of stuff." We hear anecdotes like these from our senior volunteers all the time. In short, volunteering by seniors is a healthful activity that yields multiple benefits for both the community and the individual volunteer.

As we look to the future, this health benefit is important on several levels. First, it is an attractive selling point to health conscious baby boomers. And second, encouraging greater levels of volunteering will save our nation money by keeping our older adults mentally and physically healthier than they otherwise would be, which will help to defray the cost of social programs like Medicare and Medicaid.

The business community can also play an extremely important role in efforts to engage baby boomers in meeting local needs, both through financial support to nonprofit organizations and by creating flexible employment policies. Good citizenship, as you know, is one of the very highest priorities of the Bush Administration. Since his Inauguration in 2001, the President has encouraged us to be "citizens" not "spectators." The concept of good citizenship, however, applies not only to individuals, but to businesses as well.

Business can be a powerful force for good in this area. For example, in creating flexible employment policies, businesses can make it easy for their employees, especially the aging boomers, to volunteer by offering incentives such as paid leave for volunteerism, job sharing and other flexible situations. They can give their employees special training, such as tutoring and mentoring, that increases their value as volunteers. They can also "loan" an executive to a struggling community or faith-based organization, and that executive can help it set up sound administrative, financial or technological systems. In addition, they can challenge other companies to do the same.

These actions on the part of business are not just altruistic expressions that are good for the Nation, but they also serve as sound business practices. Indeed, we know for a fact that companies that have volunteer time policies experience increases in employee productivity and morale, stronger employee retention and stronger ties to the communities in which they operate. This has the added benefit of deepening consumer and shareholder relations. Businesses may also find that they can reduce medical costs for retirees by finding ways to connect them with corporate service projects and other volunteer opportunities.

All of this adds up to a positive impact on a company's bottom line. In short, good corporate citizenship is both the right thing to do and it's a smart business practice. We need to find ways to convince more businesses that this is so.

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## Conclusion

Public policies reflect what we, as a society, value. I believe that service by seniors is critical to the future health and well-being of our Nation, and that we need to do what we can to encourage it.. I also believe that because of our experience, the Corporation for National and Community Service can be a strong leader and a strong support network in ensuring that volunteer service is attractive and accessible for all people, especially for those who are approaching their later years, regardless of their financial status.

In an era of tight budgets, pressing needs, and an untapped resource of knowledge and experience, we must do whatever we can to remove barriers to increased volunteering and civic involvement, and increase meaningful and purposeful volunteer engagement of older adults. To that end, it is important that nonprofit groups create the kind of opportunities for which the new 55+ population will want to become engaged – and that we as a Nation do what we can to promote the value of the contributions that they make as volunteers in their communities.

Our Nation doesn't think twice about encouraging people to make financial plans for their later years, and helping them to do so through tax incentives and other policies. Similarly, we must encourage our older Americans to plan their time and give their energies and experience for causes they care about in their communities. Making fullest use of those resources, and especially of the unique qualities of the 77 million members of the baby boom generations, will help to meet a variety of local needs and strengthen our communities and ensure that America's seniors are happier and healthier, defraying the costs of programs Medicare and Medicaid. What's more, making full use of our older citizens will help ensure that seniors are viewed – and that they view themselves – as valuable community assets who can contribute to society throughout their lives.

However, to meet the challenge of engaging the vast number of the coming wave of baby boomers in service to their communities, we will need your support. Therefore, I'd like to ask the Policy Committee to recommend that the 2005 White House Conference on Aging:

- Support policies that encourage a significant cultural shift in the thinking of the nonprofit sector in how groups use volunteers, helping nonprofits create meaningful opportunities for service by the coming wave of older Americans, and assisting those groups in implementing the volunteer management practices they will need to be effective.
- Support policies that encourage a cultural shift in the business sector in terms of expanding volunteer programs, offering work options to older employees, and enhancing notions of good corporate citizenship.
- Support governmental policies and actions that promote increased volunteering, service, and civic engagement by baby boomers and other older adults.

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- Support a large-scale public education campaign designed to recruit baby boomers as active citizens in their communities, promote the physical and mental health benefits of volunteering by older Americans, and put forward a new positive image of older Americans as assets rather than as liabilities.

I have provided in your packets fuller explanations for each of these policies that can be implemented to make headway in solving the challenge of engaging greater and greater numbers of older Americans in their communities, and I'd be happy to discuss these with you at greater length.

Again, I'd like to thank this Committee for your time and for your consideration. I will now gladly entertain any questions that you might have.